

WHITE, BLUE-COLLAR AND MAD

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In 1916, the votes of white males mattered because they were almost the entire electorate. The blue-collar portion of that population manned upstate New York's factories from Buffalo to Troy, churning out steel, grain silos, carpets and countless other products.

Fast forward 100 years. The mills are mostly gone and the electoral zone is flooded with women and minority voters, all with priorities of their own. In New York, white males are 28 percent of the state's population over age 18 -- a far less-dominant force in the changed world of politics.

But for better or worse, the candidacy of New York real estate mogul Donald Trump is changing all that. Now, despite a loss last week in Wisconsin, Trump is going full-throttle to win New York's suddenly crucial 95 delegates in the April 19 primary.

The pundits and politicians have long been agog over Trump's gravitational pull on the white male blue-collar population -- a wave he could surf all the way to the Republican presidential nomination.

And they're not the only ones wondering why Trump's unguarded rhetoric -- laced with what critics have decried as overt racism and misogyny -- is winning over blue-collar guys. Democrats and labor leaders who favor Hillary Clinton also are coping with groups of unionized workers attracted to Trump or U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who has long called himself a "democratic socialist."

What makes these voters tick?

"In upstate New York we're all familiar with how the economy has been hollowed out and how it's destroyed our families," said Michael Caputo, a Buffalo-based political consultant who is assisting Trump's New York campaign chairman, former GOP gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino. (Caputo ran Paladino's 2010 gubernatorial campaign.) "People in upstate New York know what it's like to have the economy abandon them."

As a fill-in talk radio host, Caputo says he hears from some voters who think they might vote for Sanders if Trump is not the nominee -- and vice-versa.

Republicans not supporting Trump have little doubt as to the source of his appeal and the draw of Sanders as well.

"I not only understand (those voters') views but I agree with them," said Rep. Chris Gibson, R-

Kinderhook, who is contemplating a gubernatorial bid in 2018. "But I respectfully disagree that Trump is the right guy to address those issues."

Gibson, who is not seeking re-election to Congress, has not endorsed any Republican candidate so far, saying "it's possible I will write in" a name if he can't make up his mind by Election Day.

Many of New York's white males without college or advanced degrees may already have made their minds up, but the impact of that block of votes is open to question.

In New York, with a high percentage of college graduates and those with advanced degrees, the white male blue-collar vote is marginal. High school graduates are 22 percent of the state's total white population ages 25 or over -- the same percentage as college grads.

Nationwide, Republicans are scared stiff of what a Trump candidacy might mean for the party. The same holds true in New York, although state GOP committee Chairman Ed Cox describes himself and the party structure itself as "helpfully neutral."

"I want the grass-roots of this party to have the satisfaction of deciding who the next president will be," Cox said. "I have faith they will do a good job."

By now, the litany of complaints voiced by supporters of anti-establishment candidates is familiar: Trade deals that move jobs overseas, Wall Street's role in the recession, wage stagnation, distrust of Washington, illegal immigration, and the influence of big money in politics.

But there are a host of historic intangibles beneath all that. Among them are automation increasingly taking humans out of the production loop, a globalized economy that might have taken shape even without those trade deals, and the bewildering pace of technical and social change.

"You take a combination of things perceived as having a negative impact -- trade, immigration, technology -- and it's not surprising they're upset and are attracted to the two extremes in the two parties," said Donald Siegel, dean of the business school at the University at Albany.

Gerald Benjamin, a political scientist at SUNY New Paltz, calls it "the expectation phenomenon."

"People don't riot when they're suppressed; they riot when they have unrealized expectations," Benjamin said. "People express discontent not when entirely on their backs, but when they can't seem to get back to where they expect to be."

In New York, the latest Siena Research Institute and Quinnipiac University polls show Trump holds a comfortable double-digit lead over Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Ohio Gov. John Kasich, while former U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, who made New York her adopted home, leads Sanders by a still significant margin.

Sanders and Trump are on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, but their New York-accented tough talk -- particularly on trade -- is catnip for less-skilled workers buffeted by flat pay, economic uncertainty and a belief that their children face a world of diminished opportunity.

But could New York be an exception?

Unlike workers in the Rust Belt, its blue-collar workforce has found relative stability in advanced manufacturing, some of it through joint SUNY Polytechnic Institute projects in Albany, Utica, Syracuse and Rochester.

The first SUNY nanotech building -- then part of UAlbany's College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering -- opened in 1993 with seven employees; it has morphed into a sprawling enterprise of 4,000 employees. GlobalFoundries in Malta similarly employs 3,000 in computer chip-making. Workers with less than a four-year college degree make up 60 percent of both workforces.

In addition, SUNY Poly's joint projects in Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo and Utica employ 15,000; about 60 percent do not hold four-year college degrees.

Although manufacturing employment in New York overall has yet to surpass pre-recession levels of a decade ago, it is up 6 percent in the Albany-Schenectady-Troy region over three years ago. Even hard-hit Buffalo, the target of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's most robust upstate economic development efforts, is up slightly.

Modern technology has rendered the old labor-intensive assembly line obsolete, but manufacturing jobs do exist for workers with the right training.

"We can't meet the demand of area businesses," said David Larkin, who teaches advanced manufacturing technology at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy. "I have CEOs come here and the only thing I hear them say is, 'Dave, I can't find enough people with skills to do the job. If I had them, I could double my business.'"

The HVCC program graduates about 100 students a year, all of them qualified to work in high-skill, high-wage manufacturing, Larkin said.

"I don't see jobs as Republican or Democrat," he said. "Manufacturers do not have any problem paying good wages for workers who have the right skills."

Nevertheless, an uptick in high-tech production is hardly enough to compensate for decades of losses in manufacturing across upstate.

A portion of New York's blue-collar population may see itself as too old for retraining but too young to retire.

"People have given up," said Caputo. "They're contracting, working off the books. The cost of living is low and they're not looking anymore."

The attraction of Trump and Sanders shows the blue-collar population is concerned with the issues that affect them, not the ideological standards of either party.

"I'm as conservative as they come, but the fact Donald Trump says positive things about Planned Parenthood, or that he's not a neocon ready to go to war, that doesn't bother me," Caputo said. "None of that matters because he cares about what makes people angry the most."

But at least one GOP leader in New York is hoping that whatever the ideological divisions, the state's blue-collar population will continue to find a home in the Republican Party.

"This is very important constituency of the state Republican Party, and always has been," said Cox, who married President Richard Nixon's daughter Tricia in a 1971 White House wedding.

"My father-in-law called them 'the silent majority,'" Cox said. "And Trump labels them that way too."

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A5 Delegate process angers voters.

C1 Albany businesses ready for Trump, Sanders visits; Chris Churchill comments.